

# **The Urgency of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Message Today**

By Don Sutherland

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day comes at a moment when the United States is deeply divided, its government has been partially shut down for 30 days and counting, and its political leaders appear to have lost the capacity (and some the desire) to carry out even the most basic responsibilities of governance. The White House, in particular, has increasingly put the interests of its narrow but politically-crucial base ahead of those of the broader national populace.

The "compromise" proposal introduced by the President was fundamentally misaligned and destined to be rejected, as it was. At its core, the President sought a permanent accommodation (\$5.7 billion funding for his desired border wall) while offering his political opponents a three-year accommodation. No credible negotiator would find a proposal in which one side would achieve permanent gain and the other would receive nothing in the end (once the temporary accommodation expired) to be anything close to balanced. But that's what happened. Once the proverbial smoke clears, it will be apparent that the effort was more about trying to shift the blame to the Democratic Party's leaders than a genuine effort to break the impasse and restart negotiations.

Today, the nation urgently needs to hear, re-read, and seriously ponder the unifying message Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. so powerfully articulated back in 1963. It needs to rediscover the bigger, more consequential things, that make this a unified republic that launched its bid for independence in 1776. It needs to launch that process from the firm foundation that every American, regardless of political differences, shares a common human foundation.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "[I have a dream](#)" speech provides exactly the substance that is needed today. In that address, Dr. King talked about the process of African Americans "gaining our rightful place" where they would truly be equal under the law. At the same time, he advised, "Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred."

Those principles can and should be applied to policy making today. Useful policy ends should be crafted based on a consensus that includes all of the nation's people, not narrow audiences whose interests and outlooks diverge from those of the nation as a whole. At all times, the process should be based on the pursuit of the "more perfect union," the establishment of "justice," and promotion of "the general welfare" and to "secure the blessings of liberty" as set forth in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

There is and ought to be no room for "bitterness and hatred" in the halls of Congress or the White House. Indeed, "bitterness and hatred" are the cancer that consumes republics, undermines governance, and saps freedom.

Will the spirit of Dr. King's message be brought to a divided Washington? Will his advice guide policy making to put it back on the path set forth by the nation's Framers when they drafted the Constitution in 1787?

For now, the deep and dark winter of political dysfunction and petty interest still prevails. Real people, some 800,000, remain unpaid. Many have been forced to stay home on account of a political battle that actually is remarkably small in comparison to the great challenges that have confronted the nation and its leaders over the course of its history.

Dr. King's seminal message illuminates a better way forward. The opportunity inherent in that guidance should be embraced.